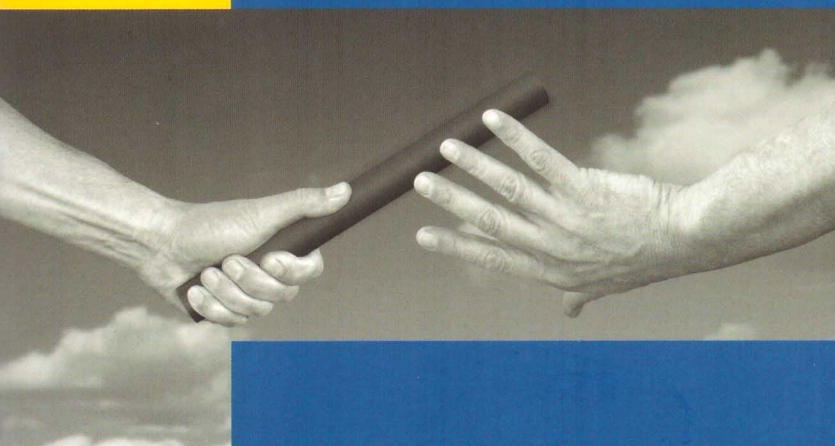


Hans Van Crombrugge, Wouter Vandenhoele
and Jan C.M. Willems (eds.)

Shared Pedagogical Responsibility



intersentia



Maastricht Centre for Human Rights

FROM PARENT TO GROUP PARENT

Parenthood (and Upbringing Pledge) in the Virtual Environment

MARTINE F. DELFOS*

In this chapter the *upbringing pledge* is placed in the context of the necessity of a broad upbringing, that is in the context of the rise of a new dimension: the virtual environment (Delfos, 2006a).

What the upbringing pledge means in a broad sense is that parents promise to raise their child well and together, when a child is born. This pledge can be renewed in the case of divorce. The pledge has no substance (as of yet), and maybe it should be getting this, analogous to what is being developed in the concept of the Dutch 'parenthood plan'. The upbringing pledge is a nice concept, but the question is whether it can satisfy its expectations when it lacks a pedagogical content. It should get more substance and thereby one could think of educational support, but even more the parents themselves should be strongly aimed at it. Parents form the foundation of their child's existence. If the parents are happy with each other, it immensely enhances the chance that they will raise their children well. *Relationship* support would in many cases probably be more effective than *educational* support. It will require a pedagogical revolution to bring about such a change, but refraining from doing so would possibly be a new form of neglecting the needs of children.

1. FROM PARENT TO GROUP PARENT

We live in a society where the upbringing on the one hand is being assigned more strictly to the parents and on the other hand is freely being influenced by the 'whole' world through the panel of TV, computer and cell phones, amongst other things. We form society together, so we do have a shared pedagogical responsibility.

* Dr. Martine F. Delfos, Utrecht, The Netherlands, is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, and is specialised in working with children and adults with multiple traumatic experiences. In addition to her work as a therapist and a lecturer she has published several books and articles in the field of psychology. Email: mfdelfos@wanadoo.nl.

ity. The upbringing pledge cannot replace the societal responsibility towards education. One of the founders of pedagogy, Comenius (1592–1670), put it as follows:

We all are citizens of the same world. To hate a human being, because he is born elsewhere, because he speaks another language, because he thinks differently about things, because he knows less or more than you do, what incomprehension! For we are all human and therefore not perfect. We all have a need for help. Nobody is without commitments towards others. (Comenius, 1667/1966).

We are at risk of losing sight of especially this last part of the words of Comenius: ‘the commitments towards others’. This has to do with a changing society, in which with the industrial revolution family ties have weakened, because people moved out of the village into the city. In Africa one still can find the meaning of collective upbringing in sayings. A Nigerian saying goes: ‘Ora na-azu nwa’, meaning ‘It takes a village to raise a child’. It expresses the necessity for a community to the growing up of the child. That this isn’t a coincidence, becomes visible when we see similar sayings from other African countries:

- Lunyoro (Banyoro): *Omwana takulila nju emoi*: A child does not grow up only in one single home (Condor, De Paul, 2006).
- Kihaya (Bahaya): *Omwana taba womoi*: A child does not belong only to one parent or home (Condor, De Paul, 2006).
- Kijita (Wajita): *Omwana ni wa bhone*; en Kiswahili: *Asiyefunzwa na mamae hufunzwa na ulimwengu*: The upbringing of a child belongs to the community. (Condor, De Paul, 2006).
- Swahili: *Mkono mmoja havlei mwana*: It is not only one hand that can bring up a child (Scheven, 1981).

In our view, the expression ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ does not express the need for manpower in education, but the need for a great diversity to develop the potential of only one child. You need someone to give love, someone to define boundaries, someone who loves fishing, someone who knows how to handle children, someone who is strict, someone who spoils, someone who reads, someone who sports, someone who loves nature, someone who explains the working of cars to you, someone who laughs with you, someone who teases you and so on. We cannot go back to the village, but we can look for solutions that meet the need for a shared upbringing.

Perhaps the answer would be to progress from a ‘parent’ to a ‘group parent’ to share part of the upbringing with other parents – not as a pledge, not in the sense of a contract, but in a pedagogical sense, that is to decide to adhere to educational values and rules as a group of parents with a group of parents in a neighbourhood,

a group of parents at school or with the parents of the peers of your child. Rules like: we do not internet from 18.00 till 20.00 in the evening. In Finland there is already a tradition that parents make these shared agreements in 'parent meetings' in primary schools. We need parents to make the upbringing pledge together, towards each other and support each other in the upbringing of their children.

The upbringing pledge seems clear, but this is no guarantee for a good upbringing. We try to raise children as well as we can, but the approach remains very often an educated guess and is prone to mistakes (Delfos, 2006a).

Japan can probably be considered the thermometer of the world. It is a thoroughly achievement oriented society, where children and adults are pushed by the highest expectations. Japanese toddlers are given lessons to prepare them for their admission exams for grammar school. Some facts from Japan show what consequences this can engender:

- 1950–1960: highest suicide figures in the world
- 1960–1980: highest figures for bullying children at primary school
- 1980–1990: highest suicide figures in young people in secondary school
- 1990–2000: hikikomori (adolescents that withdraw totally from social life and stay in their rooms at home).
- Beginning of the 21st century (2003): 850,000 drop outs who do not want to work or study.
- Beginning of the 21st century (2007): youngsters e-mail massively to the Japanese government to implore them to do something about the wave of suicide on the internet.

The last fact reminds one of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 17 introduction and part e, where it is indicated that children have the right to be protected against harmful information and material. Japanese children asked the government for protection. The Netherlands is a party to the CRC; it is up to adults to protect our children and give them boundaries within which they can learn to move freely and so they can develop optimally.

2. THE VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENT

The world in which upbringing takes place in this century has changed dramatically compared to the twentieth century. The educational space up till the 21st century consisted of three environments. The *first environment* was the family. The *second environment* was the school and the *third environment* was the world outside. In the second half of the 20th century a new environment emerged, one that deserves its own status because the educational influence is vast: the media

(TV, computer, internet, computer games, video and cell phones), with the internet as the most important influence. That is why I speak of a *fourth environment*: the *virtual environment* (Delfos, 2006a).

By virtual environment I mean the fictional world that is being created by the media, where parents and children move around passively (particularly television and video) or actively and interactively (particularly the internet, computers, cell phones and gaming) – a world in which one can move around in a real way (as oneself) or in a fictitious way (with another identity and even with changing identities). The role of adolescents in the virtual environment is unmistakable. Young people make the world mobile (Lenhart et al., 2005). Adults hardly know what happens in the virtual environment; they are not very conscious of this environment, and have little understanding of it. There seems to be a generation gap between a 16 and a 20 year old (Delfos, 2006b); people above 20 hardly understand what children below 16 are experiencing. It extends even to the language, which I call virtual steno. The virtual environment is a world in its own, where you can play with millions of others online, where you form groups of virtual friends and where you have to get up at three o'clock in the night to be able to play with your friends in Japan, in order to reach a higher level together (for instance World of Warcraft = WoW). When it comes to friends in games, they want to know if it is a RLF (Real Life Friend) or an M8 (M-eight = Mate from the computer). When one of the M8's has taken a week's leave to reach a higher level, they send each other a harsh email: *Congratulations with your not having a life of your own*. It is a world where you play with a chosen identity, where nobody knows who you are and where you try to make acquaintances with others carefully, a world where you interrupt your play to chat, to educate (*you have to go to bed now, it is late*) and where you support each other or cry to one's heart's content because your mother has died.

It is impossible to imagine life today without a computer. In general it is a blessing. But it has yet to be controlled. Children see a soap as *As the world turns* during breast feeding. The flexible baby brain takes in much media material, without knowing how to situate it. The baby cannot think: this is TV, I should not take this as seriously as my mother. When there is sexual content on an internet website during a night of feeding the baby, it does not think 'this is porn'. You can only consider something pornographic if you know what sex is. They have no thought frame to situate their experience. They process what they receive as information. That means that the material will become a part of their thinking frame.

Most of the time there is a second television set in the children's room. And children have use of the internet in most households, at school and at their friends' homes, and otherwise there is always the internet café.

Sex is an important subject on the internet. Children and adolescents are frequently confronted with explicit sexual material (Mitchell et al., 2003; Peter and

Valkenburg, 2006). In Mitchell's research, one quarter of the children mentioned that they were very disturbed by this material. Adolescents make clear that they find it very annoying to be continually confronted with sexual images (Delfos and Meere, in preparation). But they say that it is not possible to avoid it – you cannot enter the internet without seeing these images.

The possibilities of the virtual environment are tremendous and indispensable to modern society, but it has become some kind of uncontrollable monster of Frankenstein. What children can learn and discover through the internet is great, but the education that it brings about is not always favourable and the consequences as to the future are unpredictable.

3. EDUCATIONAL AUTHORITY

The virtual environment is an educational authority without ever being intended to be one. And in this latter lies the danger. As opposed to parents and school, the virtual environment cannot be held responsible for its actions, and in general it is little aware of its functioning as such an educational authority. Also, there is no intrinsic motivation within the internet as a whole, to keep itself consciously busy with its educational impact – first, because the internet is not a consistent whole and second because in general education and formation are not its aims. At school you can say: do not interfere, because it's my child or please intervene, because he attends class at your school. In schools you can debate about education. In the case of the internet, it is not under discussion. Of course there are a lot of informative sites on the internet that truly have education as their purpose, but even there it is not easy to separate the chaff from the wheat. Moreover, the computer is not a natural part of the life of adults, such as is the case with children, even very young children.

Media fills the blanks which have arisen from a changing world. As a parent or a couple of parents, it is too difficult to raise your children all by yourself. In daily life, television has become an important baby-sitter. The hypnotizing effect that emanates from the TV and computer is soothing. Even if the images are fast, the rate will still be lower than what a person has to process through his senses in daily life. Because of the magnitude of the media, the formation of children partly is provided by people who are not oriented towards education and who do not feel educational responsibility, but whose aim is to sell their product. In this way, commercial motives inadvertently penetrate the education of children. In advertising it is widely known that sex sells. The result is that the young child is sexualized. Ratings for television, sales figures for games and the number of hits on an internet website are in principle not based on educational values, but on commercial values. The influence on education is vast and parents very often are unaware

of the impact (Greenfield, 2004) and they are taken by surprise by these effects. This influence is visible in appearances like clothing and language (w8! Virtual steno for: Wait!) but also in norms and values and in behaviour. Media often provides for idols and identification figures for no other reason than to enrich their owners.

However, the pace of development is so quick, so new and so extensive, that it is difficult to translate regular standards and values to the virtual world. *Virtual codes* have to be developed, not only since the sensible is in range through the internet, but also the non-sensical and damaging influence – not only for adults, but also for children. With one press of the button or one click of the mouse, the right of children to information and freedom of speech is respected and served, but with the same action the right of children to be protected against damaging information and damaging material is violated.

4. THE NEED TO FORM ATTACHMENTS

Rutger is 22 years old. He is very intelligent (IQ 145). He was teased and bullied when he was younger. His parents are divorced and he lives as an only child with his mother. He scarcely has any contact with his father. Rutger has been keeping himself to himself and does not leave his home anymore. Even his food is brought to his room because he even does not come out of his room to come down to eat.

Examples like these occur more and more and at an increasingly younger age. It is the same phenomenon as in Japan: hikikomori. It seems to be the case that the school dropouts are not so much children or youths that do not want to go to school, but that they are youthful people who want to be in the virtual world and are even addicted to it. The Lisbon-agreements about reducing the number of youthful people without adequate starting qualifications to find work in society will be outdated if we do not intervene in time.

Hans is 21 years old. His mother blushed at admitting that she had to steal the computer from his room because after four years of conflict, she did not have a clue anymore as how to approach him about the computer, and because he withdrew himself from all domestic contact. She placed boundaries, she talked and she gave advice. She had plenty of ideas on how to cope with the situation because she was active in assistance work, but she was no match for the appeal of World of Warcraft.

On the internet you easily make contact with many people. This is attractive, especially for people with contact and relationship problems, but it is often short-

lived and superficial. People's need for longstanding relationships has not decreased, but it is getting more difficult to give it shape. The enormous increase of divorces gives expression to this fact. Life is accelerating. The consequence of this acceleration is that those emotions that are quick and fierce (anger, being in love, aggression and cheerfulness) are favoured over 'slow' emotions, such as tenderness, respect, modesty and love.

It is exactly the 'slow' emotions that attach people to one another, especially in long-term relationships. Communicating on the internet, for example chatting through MSN, meets people's need for contact. This is ideal for adolescents. While parents of previous generations noticed that their telephone bill increased dramatically during the puberty of their children, nowadays a considerable amount of the contacts of adolescents take place through the computer with the internet. The consequences of social education through communication on the internet are as yet unknown. Communication through the internet lacks a lot of non-verbal communication, especially if no image or sound is present. But smell, which unconsciously regulates people's behaviour, is absent too. The *emoticons*, the symbolic faces with emotions, cannot take over the non-verbal role. The consequence is that things are written down more strongly: the exaggeration emerges in the absence of non-verbal expression. Consequently certain things can come across incredibly harsh. Because of this, bullying on the internet has become quite a serious problem (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004). Problems of children in the real world seem to be enhanced in the virtual world (van den Eijnden et al., 2006). Moreover children who are being bullied spend more time on the internet and additionally are even being bullied more severely (van den Eijnden et al., 2006). The internet seems to be a godsend for lonely people, but finding friends on the internet proves to disrupt their daily life (Morahan-Martin and Scumacher, 2003). Introvert children also use the internet as compensation for their lack of social skills (Valkenburg and Schouten, 2005).

There is a difference between boys and girls. Boys are more active in gaming; girls engage more in chatting, like MSN (Madell and Muncer, 2004; Meerkerk et al., 2006; Delfos and Meere, in preparation). Adolescents who have problems with their parents, use the internet more often to form online relations (Wolak et al., 2003). Depressed young people use the internet for information (Gould et al., 2002) and they have the tendency to communicate intensely with strangers and expose themselves more than young people without problems (Ybarra et al., 2005). Not only is the medium anonymous, but it is even more powerful than that: you can create an identity for yourself that fits you better. In an online game you can create a world where you are a different person. For many online games you have to pay to play, but you can also earn money with another identity. You can also deceive others with a false identity. If you do not succeed or if you are not successful enough in forming gratifying attachments in the real world, you can

form relations on the internet through chatting or gaming on a fictional basis. You can have a fictional lover, you can chat with a computerized pop idol and perhaps there even is a parents.com available where you can subscribe to more pleasant – virtual – parents. The memory is probably not good enough to always distinguish real from virtual experiences.

5. VIRTUAL LIFE ENSCHEDE

In the Virtual Life Enschede research project, we are trying to find a way how to offer children and adolescents a healthy virtual development. The advantages of the computer and internet are enormous; you cannot deprive society from them anymore. But just as in the case of television, we will have to find a way to protect children. It will have to be a worldwide answer, because the internet operates worldwide – the basic digital highway is not called the www: the worldwide web, for nothing. The advertising code commission and the ‘kijkwijzer’ TV tool with symbols to help parents know what kind of program is being broadcasted, cannot protect against foreign TV channels. It is the same for the internet; it needs a worldwide protection code.

The results of the research in Enschede on the internet behaviour of children and young people from ten to fourteen years old (Delfos and Meere, in preparation) match the outcome of the national digital research (De Haan and 't Hof, 2007). Besides that, in the Enschede research the interviews went deeper into the subjects in order to understand the children better in relation to their internet experiences. Some of the results are:

1. Children and youngsters spend many hours a day at the computer. It is a substantial part of their life. Especially MSN and online gaming are important. Children in primary school spend somewhat less time at the computer than youngsters in the first two classes of secondary school (13–14 years old). All children who were interviewed did spend time using MSN. The time varied from 10 minutes to 5 hours a day on school days. Three quarters of the first grades in secondary school spend more than an hour a day on MSN – girls more than boys. Boys play more computer games than girls. The computer is scarcely used for homework. If all the time that children say they spend at the computer (MSN, games, profile sites, surfing, etc.) is added up, it becomes clear that there is not much time left after school for other things. During vacations the computer use increases. Children move less, because their play behaviour is shifted to the computer room.

2. Parents rarely ask children about their experiences on the computer. For parents it is natural to ask about school or a party with friends, but they seldom ask about the – daily – experiences of children on the internet.
3. Youngsters experience a gap between the real and the virtual world. In the virtual world they dare more and they tell things more strongly. As a result, they fight more with harsh scolding and they dare tell their infatuations earlier, and they go steadily more quickly. The translation to the real world encounters many problems.
4. Many children mentioned spontaneously that they feel they are addicted to the computer, and some of them say that their parents are addicted.
5. Children and youngsters want rules, and protection. They have no problems having their parents and teachers pay attention to their internet activities; on the contrary, they ask for it. They propose reading their history – the overview of the websites they have visited recently – and their chats. They propose this as well as protection for their parents to be reassured. First graders of secondary school advised the protection of primary school children.
6. Youngsters want protection and they ask for ideas about computer use and the internet. They value it highly when adults know about computers and the internet.
7. Hardly any *virtual codes* have been developed for actions such as stealing other than the saying: it is your own fault – you should not have given your password.
8. Children see their parents as their most important guide and teachers as second in line. At the same time they point out that their parents and teachers are not always very computer-minded. Youngsters support the idea of caregivers who impose limits as a necessity, and say they miss this in their parents and teachers.
9. With regard to problems that they encounter, youngsters mentioned the seriousness, the magnitude and the fierceness of quarrels on MSN, and the sexual images they are confronted with.
10. Young people make clear that there is a kind of inflation going on through the internet with respect to serious problems (suicide, auto mutilation and anorexia), and they mention the risk of contagion of behaviour.

Children and adolescents spend much time at the computer, especially on the internet and they enjoy it enormously. Still, they experience daily the disadvantages and would like to be protected against it.

6. CONCLUSION

It is a right of children to be protected against harmful information and material (Article 17, introduction and part e of the Convention on the Rights of the Child – CRC). The CRC is in fact one vast *international educational pledge*. The time has come for countries to fulfil this pledge when it comes to the internet.

As a matter of fact, it is the adolescent from the sixties that has the world in his hands at the beginning of the 21st century: Bill Gates. Adolescents are the innovators, and they adore new gadgets. As the world becomes more and more dependent on technology, so will it be more and more dependent on adolescents. In the past century, adults still had power, but now they structurally lag behind adolescents as to knowledge of, and experience with the virtual environment. Knowledge is power and adults have a vast deficiency in knowledge in the virtual environment. But adults have the advantage of experience and life experience, and because of that they know how to place experiences into context, and assess their real value. Adolescents need adults to help them appreciate the value of their experiences.

It is up to adults to develop standards and values, virtual codes, for the virtual environment. Young people need and want to be protected in order to be free, because for real freedom you need boundaries. The upbringing pledge needs content; we have to involve the internet with respect to Article 17 part e of the CRC – as a kind of international upbringing pledge – to help children and adolescents develop in a healthy way in the virtual and the real environment.

REFERENCES

- Comenius, J. A. (1667/1966). *De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica*. Pragae: Sumptibus Academiae Scientiarum Bohemoslovacae (original work from 1667).
- Condor, De Paul (2006). It takes a village to raise a child. (n.d.). Retrieved April 20, 2006, from <http://condor.depaul.edu/~jmcintos>.
- de Graaf, H., & Vanwesenbeeck, I. (2006). *Seks is een game: Gewenste en ongewenste seksuele ervaringen van jongeren op internet*. Utrecht: Rutgers Nisso Groep.
- de Haan, J. & van 't Hof, C. (2007). *Jaarboek: De digitale generatie*. Amsterdam: Boom.
- Delfos, M.F. (2006a). *Het maakbare kind. Opvoeding als (ver)gissing*. Amsterdam: SWP.
- Delfos, M.F. (2006b). Gooi kinderen niet voor de wolven, maar stel grenzen en trotseer de protesten. *NRC Handelsblad*, September 2, 2006, p. 17.

- Delfos, M.F., & Meere, W. (in voorbereiding). *Multimediatedrag van kinderen en jongeren. Praktijkgericht onderzoek naar hun beleving van multimedia en de behoefte aan interventies in het virtuele leven.*
- Gould, M.S., Munfakh, J.L.H., Lubell, K., Kleinmann, M., Parker, S. (2002). Seeking Help From the Internet During Adolescence. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, 41 (10): 1182–1189.
- Greenfield, P.M. (2004). Developmental considerations for determining appropriate Internet use guidelines for children and adolescents. *Applied Developmental Psychology* 25: 751–762.
- Lenhart, A., Madden, M., & Hitlin, P. (2005). *Teens and Technology: Youth are leading the transition to a fully wired and mobile nation.* Washington DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project.
- Madell, D. & Muncer, S. (2004). Gender differences in the use of the Internet by English secondary school children. *Social Psychology of Education* 7: 229–251.
- Meerkerk, G., van den Eijnden, R.J.J.M. & Rooij, T. van (2006). *Monitor Internet en Jongeren: Compulsief Internetgebruik onder Nederlandse Jongeren.* Rotterdam: IVO Factsheet.
- Mitchell, K. J., Finkelhor, D., & Wolak, J. (2003). The Exposure of Youth to Unwanted Sexual Material on the Internet: A National Survey of Risk, Impact, and Prevention. *Youth & Society, Vol. 34 No. 3:* 330–358.
- Morahan-Martin, J., & Schumacher, P. (2003). Loneliness and Social Uses of the Internet. *Computers in Human Behavior* 19: 659–671.
- Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P.M. (2006). Adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit material on the Internet. *Communication Research* 33 (2): 178–204.
- Scheven, A. (1981). *Swahili Proverbs.* Washington DC: University of America Press.
- Valkenburg, P.M., & Schouten, A.P. (2005). Developing a model of adolescent friendship formation on the Internet. *Cyberpsychology and Behavior* 8 (5): 423–430.
- van den Eijnden, R., Vermulst, A., v. Rooij, T., & Meerkerk, G.J. (2006). *Monitor Internet en Jongeren: Pesten op Internet en het Psychosociale Welbevinden van Jongeren.* Rotterdam: IVO Factsheet.
- Wolak, J., Mitchell, K.J., & Finkelhor, D. (2003). Escaping or connecting? Characteristics of youth who form close online relationships. *Journal of Adolescence* 26:105–119.
- Ybarra, M.L., & Mitchell, K.J. (2004). Youth engaging in online harassment: associations with caregiver–child relationships, Internet use, and personal characteristics. *Journal of adolescence* 27: 319–336.

Ybarra, M. L., Alexander, C., Mitchell, K.J. (2005). Depressive symptomatology, youth Internet use, and online interactions: a national survey. *Journal of Adolescent Health* 36: 9–18.